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ABSTRACT

A comparative, protocol-based study is reported of the first (Chinese) and foreign (English) language writing processes of six postgraduate English-as-a-Foreign-Language students. The study revealed the approaches of the six writers to the task of producing academic written discourse to be very different, and suggested that if composing strategies of individual writers were effective or otherwise in the first language, they were likely to be so also in the second language. It appeared that factors relating to cognitive capacity were more relevant than linguistic proficiency where writing processes were concerned. However, a common source of difficulty in both writing tasks, and deficiency in the resulting texts, even for those with proficient writing strategies, was found to be an inadequate awareness of the nature of written language and the demands its production makes upon the writer. Contains 23 references. (LB)

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FIRST AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPOSING: A PROTOCOL-BASED STUDY

Valerie Arndt

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Introduction

This paper reports a comparative, protocol-based study of the first (Chinese) and foreign (English) language writing processes of six postgraduate EFL students. The study revealed the approaches of the six writers to the task of producing academic written discourse to be very different, and suggested that if composing strategies of individual writers were effective or otherwise in L1, they were likely to be so too in L2. Thus it appeared that factors relating to cognitive capacity were more relevant than linguistic proficiency where writing processes were concerned. At the same time however, a common source of difficulty in both writing tasks, and deficiency in the resulting texts, even for those with proficient writing strategies, was found to be an inadequate awareness of the nature of written language and the demands its production makes upon the writer.

First and foreign language composing: a protocol-based study

A sense of dissatisfaction over the teaching of writing, predominantly in first language teaching situations, since that is where most of the research to date has been done, but also increasingly in foreign/second language teaching, is immediately apparent from even a cursory review of the literature in this field. This uneasiness stems from an awareness that educational practices relating to this 'integrative activity involving many complex procedures' (Martlew 1983 p xiii) have often failed in the past, and are still failing, to address the psychological and cognitive processes intrinsic to the task; they have tended to deal with surface manifestations of precision, order and correctness of finished product, rather than with the imprecision, disorder and errors of what is increasingly perceived to be the much more crucial process underlying text generation and production.

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Young (1978) has suggested the term 'current-traditional' as a convenient label for the paradigm which he argues has dominated the teaching of writing for several decades. Its 'prescriptive and orderly view of the creative act' (Hairston 1982 p 78) neglects the importance of discovering ideas and creating meaning; its faith in pre-planning and outlining before writing commences indicates a belief that writers know exactly what they want to say before they start; its stress on the orderly progression of writing through stages of pre-writing/writing/re-writing indicates a conception of the writing process as linear; and the importance attached to editing and proof-reading skills leads to a notion of writing as simple rule-applying rather than as a demanding intellectual activity which can be a significant means of learning. As a 'static and unexamined approach' to the teaching of writing, its main weakness is seen to lie in the fact that its proponents have 'not tested it against the composing processes of actual writers' (Hairston 1982 p 78).

However, over the last two decades, there has gradually developed a repudiation of the beliefs and emphases associated with this paradigm, and a change of approach to the teaching of writing which has come to be characterised as 'process centred'. The focus has turned from the 'what' of writing to the 'how' (Barritt and Kroll 1978); attempts have been made to understand how writing abilities develop, and to account for the perceived lack of success in teaching writing in the school or institutional setting (Britton et al 1975; Freedman et al 1983; Galbraith 1981; Wason 1981); and the cognitive nature of the writing activity has been emphasised, with cognitive psychologists claiming that aspects of its complexity can best be understood in terms of a specialised form of problem solving, and the development of writing abilities in terms of the development of certain types of cognitive capacity (Bracewell 1981; Barritt and Kroll 1978; Cooper and Matsuhashi 1983; Flower and Hayes 1981; Gregg and Steinberg 1980; Martlew 1983).

To the extent that L2 writing pedagogy has been based on the traditional, product centred L1 writing pedagogy, with its excessive emphasis on form and correctness to the neglect of generation of ideas and creation of meaning, then there is certainly much to be gained from the new awareness in L1 teaching of what writing actually involves, and the resultant orientation towards process. However, a preoccupation with process at the expense of product has its own dangers. Written language,

by virtue of its nature as 'language in writing' (Ludwig 1983), has influences upon the activities leading to its production which are universal and transcend differences in tongues across geographical and regional linguistic barriers. For writers in a foreign language, the problem is 'how to textualise discourse in a different language' (Widdowson 1983 p 45). Knowledge about writing-as-activity acquired in the first language has to be realised through knowledge of writing-as-text manifested in linguistic rules of the foreign language, rules relating not only to correctness of syntax or spelling at sentence level, but also to textual conventions of genre, coherence and formality at discourse level.

Nystrand (1982) underlines the importance of this latter kind of knowledge in his claim that:

> the resources of discourse are not ancillary to cognition, but actually shape the possibilities for and hence the conduct of discourse itself ... language is the *sine qua non* of discourse. Hence there is more to writing research than the study of written discourse processes. (p 7)

To recognise this, and to recognise that the acquisition of such knowledge of the resources of the written language for discourse may be the area where L2 writers (at least at the level of those in the study reported here) need most guidance, is by no means to denigrate the contributions of the 'process approach' to EFL writing pedagogy. As Zamel (1983) points out, the assumption of such an approach - that we find out how best to teach if we discover more about how learners learn - parallels the assumptions behind much recent second language acquisition research. Furthermore, it parallels the stress which such research lays on the individuality of learners with their differing needs, abilities, rates of learning, cognitive styles and learning strategies. Its advocation of a less prescriptive approach than that of product centred methodology, its appreciation of the need to view writing as essentially a problem solving undertaking rather than a rule applying exercise or creative accident, its insistence on the non-linear nature of the writing process - all these can only be beneficial.

Yet doubts remain as to whether this process is completely accessible to consciousness and hence observable. A production process, if not

necessarily linear, is nonetheless evolutionary, for the very concept of process involves some kind of movement from one stage to the next. Something which did not exist at the outset is produced through a series of operations which involve gradual change. How this evolution occurs in writing depends ultimately on what Britton et al (1975) refer to as 'the dialectical interpenetration of language and thought' (p47), and this most crucial part of the process is difficult, if not impossible to access. Nevertheless, there are manifestations of other types of operation contributing to this evolutionary process which are more accessible, and it is with these that the present study is largely concerned.

In the framework of the current interest in writing as process, both in L1 and L2 contexts, and in view of the present paucity of comparative studies, it was hoped that a study of the activities of writers writing both in their native and foreign languages might help to elucidate similarities and differences between the two processes, and suggest areas of priority for teaching L2 writing. Conclusions from research so far into the processes of L2 writing suggest that they are, despite the additional linguistic burdens involved, very similar to those of L1 writing. Difficulties of L2 writers stem from the constraints of the composing activity, or of discourse type, rather than simply the mechanics of language; successes of proficient L2 writers result from effective strategies of text generation and evaluation, and not merely linguistic fluency. Furthermore, composing skills of proficient L2 writers are very similar to those of proficient L1 writers. The study reported here suggests as a corollary of this that, in the cases of individual writers, where such skills are efficient and effective in their L1 writing, they are likely to be so too in their L2 writing, thus implying that factors relating to cognitive capacity and style may be more relevant than linguistic proficiency in accounting for the way in which a written text is produced.

Design and limitations of the study

The six students who took part in the study were Chinese native speaking EFL students in their final year of postgraduate study at Nankai University in Tianjin, China. Ability to write proficiently in English was important to them, their academic competence often being judged on the basis of their written L2 performance. The study examined their

composing activities and the resulting texts as they wrote first in Chinese and then in English, with the primary aim of comparing the L1 and L2 composing processes. In order to do this, the procedures of protocol analysis were followed, whereby the students were asked to 'compose aloud' into tape recorders in individual booths in the language laboratory. The different types of composing activity thus recorded on the resulting 'protocols' were later categorised and coded according to a scheme based on that developed by Perl (1979, 1981), and the coded activities of each protocol were entered upon composing style sheets. (A list of coding categories used can be found in figure 1.)

Reducing the information on the tapes to chart form in this way can be considered at once a weakness and a strength of this method of protocol analysis. Since the validity of any conclusions drawn from it depends upon how satisfactorily and consistently the composing activities are categorised and coded, the coding of the protocols is obviously the crucial part of the whole operation. Its weakness lies not only in the fact that judgements made by the coder often have to depend upon inferences drawn from what is verbalised, but also that the writers manifest varying degrees of capacity for, and consistency of, verbalisation. On the other hand, however, a concise, standardised and categorical basis is provided for discerning the patterns and styles of each writer's composing process; sequencing and frequency of various operations can be readily perceived; and comparisons both between writers, and between each individual writer's approaches to different tasks, are facilitated.

Besides the necessarily inferential nature of judgements made in the analysis, probing composing processes in this way has other drawbacks. Amongst them is the unreality and unfamiliarity of the task of composing aloud, which, quite apart from the strain of performing two tasks at once - composing aloud and composing, almost certainly interferes with normal composing activities (Faigley and Witte 1981); second, there is the artificiality of the rhetorical context of the writing[1]; third, there is the incompleteness of the account yielded by protocols, since certain contributory operations in the processes of thought and articulation of meaning in language are simply unavailable to conscious awareness; and finally, there is the curious paradox that although protocols represent an attempt to probe a process underlying a product, they are themselves products of a different process - that of introspection[2].

Nevertheless, think-aloud procedures are recognised, in general, as a useful means of tracing cognitive processes, especially when the information to be verbalised is stored in a verbal code, as is the case with writing (Ericsson and Simon 1980 p 227); and, in particular, the variety of information yielded by the revelations of the protocols in the present study suggests that, whilst protocol analysis can in no way provide a complete account of normal composing processes, it may, nevertheless, have considerable value for teachers in indicating problems to be addressed in the classroom, and for students in raising levels of awareness about what the activity of writing involves.

Six writers: six approaches

A key issue in recent second language acquisition research has been how the individual needs of language learners impose the need for flexibility in teaching in order to accommodate differing cognitive capacities, cognitive styles and motivational factors. As far as writing is concerned, Wason (1981) has suggested that we would be very wrong to suppose that there is one best way to understand how people write. Likewise, it would seem foolhardy to propose that there is one best way to teach writing, for one of the most interesting revelations of the protocols was the extent to which the writers differed from each other in their approaches to the same tasks, although each writer's strategies for composing remained consistent across languages. Supposedly relatively homogeneous as a group[3], the six writers as individuals demonstrated as great a variety of style in composing process as in finished composition, and a matching range of problems and deficiencies to be addressed in any hypothetical writing programme.

One of them for instance, the 'outliner', needed the entire writing session in one task to orient herself towards her chosen topic, producing no text proper at all, only a series of outlines. Her natural instinct seemed to be to let the writing activity generate her ideas, but she smothered it with consciously learned 'outlining' and 'topic sentence' procedures. Another, in contrast, started on his text in the very first minute, with virtually no orientation period. He was a 'lister', for whom writing was a process of filling up the paper with fragments of ideas as they occurred, generating large quantities of text but without concern for how the items on the list

might fit into an overall structure of meaning. A third writer seemed to find writing a relatively effortless and spontaneous activity. The 'reviser', she not only paid attention to how her total text was evolving throughout the process, but appeared to be able to monitor her progress as she wrote more successfully than the rest. In contrast to her, the 'struggler' found writing an especially painful and deliberate process. Her protocols revealed the constant wrestle she was involved in to make sure the words she transcribed actually reflected the meaning she had in mind. The remaining two provide a different kind of contrast. The overriding concern of one, the 'thinker', was to get to the logical heart of his ideas, and make sure that what he wrote made rational sense. Whereas he needed no written plan or outline, he spent considerable time **thinking** about what he was aiming to say. The other one, however, the 'planner', seemed to be able to write nothing without first tracing out elaborate superstructural frameworks - introduction, main points, examples to support, conclusion - as he had apparently been taught. Yet, his texts as they evolved did not fit the preconceived frameworks, neither did the plans seem to help in the production of the actual text.

The protocols thus appeared to confirm the expectation that the processes of writing (at this level) would remain consistent, irrespective of whether L1 or L2 were being used as the medium, such that if strategies for text generation and production were efficient or otherwise in L1 writing, they would tend to be so too in L2 writing. At the same time, they revealed how different these processes were in individual cases.

Three problems in common

Limitations of space preclude an exhaustive analysis of other disclosures from the protocols - confirmations of how the least precise pre-planning seems in general to make for the easiest generation of text, for instance (cf Rose's 1980 study); or of how the enormous generative power of the actual activity of writing leads to a wide range of discoveries relating to finding a focus for discussion, organising ideas, and clarifying concepts; or of how far from the reality of the composing act is a linear, 'stage-process' model (Flower and Hayes 1981) of the process.

There are three areas, however, highlighted by the protocols, which might usefully be specified. The problems pertaining to them appear to

be common to all the writers, in both tasks, and have to do with the difficulties of meeting the demands made by the production of language-in-writing, especially such language in its transactional function of academic exposition (the type the writers in the study were called upon to produce). They relate to coherence, critical self-awareness, and commitment.

The construction of overall coherence of meaning has often been noted as perhaps the most essential element of a completed text, and yet the most taxing aspect of its production. The protocols revealed the strategies of the writers in this respect to be inadequate. They had a severely restricted concept of global planning, being overly concerned with superstructural formats of paragraphs and points at the expense of shaping the meaning relationships underpinning them. Their revision strategies were, by and large, related only to meaning at a local level, with the translation, that is, of immediate thought into word. There appeared to be little effort to find the shape or form of the overall argument (doubtless partly on account of the time constraints they were working under), and asssessment or evaluation of how the text as a whole was evolving was virtually non-existent. Yet the protocols also revealed that, in many cases, the necessary cues for creating this coherence were there in the writers' thoughts; the difficulty was in accessing these cues and transposing them into written form. This, it would appear, tends to support Galbraith's (1981) observation that written thought often seems 'impoverished' in comparison with the reflective thought that led to its creation. It might also suggest a possible role for protocol analysis as an instrument whereby writers might be helped to capture from their thoughts the coherence missing from their texts. (Figure 2 contains an example of a sentence from one of the written texts, together with its accompanying protocol, to illustrate this discrepancy.)

The second problem area common to all the writers concerns their capacity to be critical of their texts. Writers need to evaluate the language they choose to convey their meaning in writing, in terms of whether it is explicit and autonomous enough to enable its intended reader to recreate that meaning in its entirety. The protocols suggest that the awareness required for such evaluation was inadequate, or at least under-exploited by the writers in the study. They did not, on the whole,

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demonstrate mastery of what Martlew (1983) refers to as the 'metalinguistic' and 'metacognitive' skills (p306) which enable a writer to stand back from the text, re-view it with the reader's eyes, and make sure that message is adequately geared to audience.

Finally, the question of commitment. Writing is by its nature an act of public commitment whereby private thought is given potentially permanent form as a linguistic artefact. Effective writing, however, is an act of personal commitment, involving a 'confrontation with the self' without which writers cannot 'free themselves from the tutelage of sterotyped models to which they assume they should conform' (Wason 1981 p361). The **texts** in the study, produced in an artificial rhetorical context of 'essay making' (Nystrand 1982) and without a genuine purpose, suggest little serious effort by the writers to struggle towards what Galbraith (1981) terms a 'private', as opposed to an 'institutional' conception of what they were writing about. Yet the **protocols** contain a much richer range of evaluations, judgements and opinions, the incorporation of which into the texts would have led to that commitment to an attitude towards what was being written about, felt to be one of the measures of quality, even in academic writing, that ostensibly most sober of genres.

A final implication

Since the focus of this comparative study was on writing processes, its primary concern was not with evaluation of the written products (which, with one exception, were in any case incomplete). Yet process and product are inextricably intertwined, for the activities which are responsible for a text's production are, to a considerable degree, determined by the very nature of written language. Knowing more about **how** written texts come into being may indeed help teachers address relevant problems, particularly those of writers with ineffective composing strategies. The harsh fact remains, however, that writers are judged ultimately by **what** they produce, and here the writer's knowledge of the resources of the language and how to manipulate them to create effective written text seems at least as important as proficient writing strategies. At the heart of the endeavour of producing language-in-writing lies the creation of meaning through successful fusion of

thought and language, to achieve which with increasing effectiveness requires an ever more sophisticated knowledge of the resources of the language being used as a medium of expression. This, it is suggested, cannot be attained by any writer, least of all those writing in a non-native language, solely as a result of greater attention being paid to the processes of writing.

Notes

1. The writers were asked to write expositions of various aspects of life in modern China in the form of an article for a Chinese university magazine in the first task, and for an English university audience in the second. Consciously or unconsciously, however, they quite rightly perceived the true purpose of their writing to be to provide data for analysis, often addressing remarks in the protocols to myself.

2. Besides the general limitations of protocol analysis, there was the specific drawback in the present study of unavoidable time constraints, resulting from restrictions on the availablity of laboratory facilities: the two tasks were performed too closely together, in one-hour sessions separated only by a short break; there was virtually no opportunity for an 'incubation' or 'gestation' period, acknowledged to be of fundamental importance in the total process; and there was little opportunity for redrafting (only one of the six writers completed even a first draft).

3. Objective measures of linguistic and academic achievement were unavailable. It had to be assumed, therefore, that the writers, by virtue of having reached their final year of postgraduate study in one of China's 'key' universities, had considerable proficiency in both respects.

Figure 1: Coding categories and symbols

Major categories

PL	planning (finding a focus, deciding what to write about)
PLG	global planning (deciding how to organise total text)
PLL	local planning (deciding how to organise parts of text)
RH	rehearsing (trying out ideas and language to express them)
RH—›W	rehearsing leading directly to writing
W	writing
SW	speaking words as they are being written
SM	speaking miscue (mismatch between graphic and verbalised records)
R	reading what has been written
RM	reading miscue (mismatch between graphic and verbalised records)
RP	repeating words or phrases
SC	scanning back over text so far
RV	revising (making changes for meaning)
E	editing (making changes for formal correctness of syntax, spelling etc)
A	assessing (global); A(-) = negative; A(+) = positive
Q	questioning
C	commenting (on matters extraneous to writing task)
MC	metacommenting (showing awareness of writing task)
S	silence
I	intervention irrelevant to writing task
U	unintelligible remark

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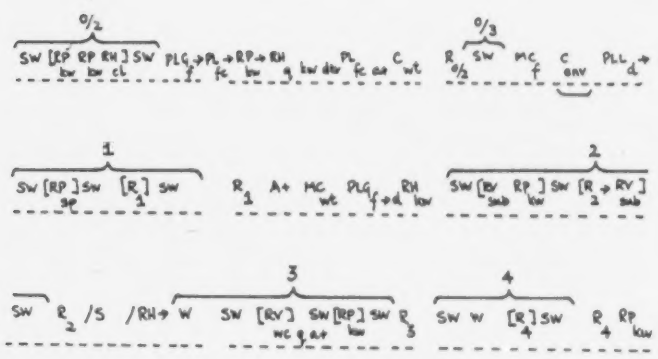
Subscripts

a	assessing (local)
add	addition
aud	audience
c	content
ca	composing aloud
dev	development of new idea
cl	clarification of old idea
el	elaboration of old idea
d	direction (writers give themselves)
del	deletion
ex	example
end	ending
env	environment
f	form (arrangement of paragraphs)
fc	focus
kw	keyword
l	language (formality or appropriacy)
lw	last word (written or spoken)
np	next/new paragraph
npt	next/new point
o	outline
orth	orthography (legibility)
q	question
reo	reordering
sp	spelling
st	how to start
stt	statement
sty	style
sub	substitution
t	topic
tr	translation of term/concept
wc	word choice
wl	writer's life
wt	writing task (present one)

Figure 2: Sample of part of a composing style sheet



TIME-LINE	each sequence of broken lines = 1 minute of composing time
NUMERALS	refer to segment of outline or text proper (usually segmented by sentence)
HORIZONTAL BRACKETS	above time-line = graphic recording of segment of outline or text proper
HORIZONTAL BRACKETS	below time-line = verbalisation in a language different from that being used for the written text
VERTICAL BRACKETS	indicate that composing operations are interrupting graphic recording
OBLIQUE SLASHES	enclose periods of silence or outside intervention
ARROW (—›)	indicates an operation occurring as a direct result of the previous one

Figure 3: **Coherence of thought not reflected in written text**

Sentence from one of the Chinese texts (in translation):

> (As far as) the open-door policy, and being open to the influence of the new technological revolution (is concerned), we need large numbers of reformers with the pioneering spirit, who have the daring and the ability to adjust their own production according to whatever the market changes may be,* this is mainly because of the bondage of tradition.

Verbalisation in the protocol which accompanied the writing of this sentence at the point marked *:

> but we have really few of such kinds of people in modern China. If we speak of the present situation, of course we can't say that there aren't ANY ...but ...why should this be so? Most important is because of the 'Doctrine of the Mean', the traditional outlook, this is mainly because of the bondage of tradition.

(The underlined words in the above quotation are those which were transcribed graphically as they were verbalised.)

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